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SUBJECT: MACEDONIA: AS PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION CAMPAIGN
KICKS OFF, ALBANIAN PARTIES SQUARE OFF

REF: A. SKOPJE 451

[¶](#)B. SKOPJE 420 AND PREVIOUS

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SUMMARY

[¶](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY. The 20-day official campaign season for Macedonia's July 5 parliamentary elections began June 15, with a total of 31 parties competing in the country's six electoral districts. The parliament on June 12 amended the criminal code to stiffen penalties for violations of the electoral code, party leaders signed a USG-sponsored Code of Conduct for the elections June 13, and both the Islamic Community and the Macedonian Orthodox Church have issued appeals for free, fair and peaceful elections. The latest polls show opposition VMRO-DPMNE and governing SDSM running neck-and-neck; the earlier gap between ethnic Albanian rivals DUI and DPA is shrinking, with DUI polling 17% and DPA 13%. Despite the public calls by parties and religious leaders for peaceful elections, violent campaign-related incidents, mostly between ethnic Albanian parties but including ethnic Macedonian parties as well, have marred the first week of the campaign. If those incidents continue unchecked, they will put at risk Macedonia's EU and NATO aspirations, a message we are conveying to all parties. End Summary.

CAMPAIGN KICKOFFS

[¶](#)2. (U) The official 20-day campaign season for Macedonia's July 5 parliamentary elections kicked off June 15, although most parties had "unofficially" begun to campaign weeks prior to that date. Jumping the gun slightly, governing SDSM launched its campaign June 14 with the slogan "Forward, Not Backward" during a multi-media extravaganza attended by 15,000 supporters at the Skopje city stadium. On June 15, opposition VMRO-DPMNE's "Strength for Macedonia" campaign kicked off in the southern tourist resort of Ohrid, while eAlbanian DUI (junior governing coalition partner) opened in Skopje with the slogan "We are courageous, we act. You decide." DPA, the major eAlbanian opposition party, kept its slogan simple -- "We Believe."

CANDIDATE LISTS - MULTI-ETHNIC, GENDER-BALANCED

[¶](#)3. (U) A total of 31 political parties and coalitions submitted candidate lists (each party or coalition can submit

a list of up to 20 candidates in each of 6 electoral districts), all of which were approved by the State Election Commission. The lists reflected the increased female candidate representation called for in the new electoral code (ref A), and many of the lists comprised inter-ethnic coalitions. DUI's list, for example, has an ethnic Bosniac heading their list in one district, with an ethnic Macedonian in the second slot. SDSM's coalition list includes Turk, Vlach, Roma, and Serb candidates.

STIFFER PENALTIES FOR ELECTORAL CODE VIOLATIONS

¶14. (U) On June 12, the Macedonian Parliament amended the criminal code to stiffen penalties for election law violations. The amended law does away with financial penalties for violations, but increases the minimum sentence for committing electoral fraud to three years imprisonment. For violations involving the use of violence, sentences of not less than five years imprisonment will be the norm in the amended law.

CODE OF CONDUCT AND OTHER MESSAGES ON FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS

¶15. (SBU) On June 13, more than 30 leaders of all the major parties (except for DUI leader Ali Ahmeti) attended a public signing of an election Code of Conduct. DUI officials later said Ahmeti, who had earlier signed the Code, had previously-scheduled commitments that prevented him from attending the public event. However, a DUI insider told us Ahmeti has become increasingly frustrated and despondent over his party's inability to sustain the significant poll lead it enjoyed over DPA earlier this year, and was avoiding public appearances. Two days later, however, he was the keynote speaker at DUI's kickoff rally.

RELIGIOUS GROUPS CALL FOR FREE, FAIR AND PEACEFUL ELECTIONS

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¶16. (SBU) The Islamic Community of Macedonia, at Embassy prompting, issued a public statement June 7 calling on Macedonia's Muslims to ensure free, fair and peaceful elections that would guarantee individual voting rights. After the IC followed up with a joint (US, EU, NATO, OSCE) statement welcoming the ICM announcement, the Macedonian Orthodox Church added a statement of its own along similar lines, reiterating its commitment to staying out of direct involvement in the campaign. The Skopje Mufti also has called on imams in the area not to allow mosques to be used for political campaigning.

VMRO-DPMNE AND SDSM NECK-AND-NECK IN LATEST POLL

¶17. (U) The latest opinion poll, conducted by a VMRO-DPMNE affiliated research institute, shows the opposition party running neck-and-neck with governing SDSM, with each garnering 26% support. DUI leads DPA with 17% to 13%, but its earlier 3:1 lead has evaporated. Nationalist VMRO-NP and SDSM breakaway NSDP both register 4.5%. In an earlier poll conducted in June, VMRO-DPMNE leader Gruevski's personal popularity rating was at 23%, while PM Buckovski's stood at 11%. DUI President Ahmeti and DPA President Xhaferi were at 9.6% and 6.3%, respectively.

VIOLENT INCIDENTS BETWEEN ETHNIC ALBANIAN PARTIES MAR CAMPAIGN START

¶18. (SBU) Despite the signing of the Code of Conduct and calls by religious leaders for a peaceful campaign and elections, DUI and DPA accused each other of provoking a series of violent incidents in the first days of the official campaign. Most incidents involved destruction of posters or other party symbols, but others included gunfire and grenade attacks (most of which did not detonate) on local party campaign headquarters. The attacks usually have occurred late at night, when the party premises are unoccupied; there

has been damage to property, but no injuries.

¶9. (SBU) The Ambassador and EU Special Representative summoned DUI and DPA leaders to the Embassy June 20 to chastise them for the incidents and to warn of serious consequences if the incidents did not cease immediately (ref B). At the end of a three-hour meeting, both leaders agreed to issue a public declaration in front of the media calling on their supporters to refrain from such acts or provocations, and committing their parties to free and fair elections. While the number of incidents has dropped significantly since then, the media and various party headquarters continue to report some acts of attempted intimidation and attacks on local party offices, especially between ethnic Albanian rivals DUI and DPA, but also between SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE supporters.

COMMENT

¶10. (SBU) Although the reported incidents of provocation and intimidation are disturbing, seasoned Macedonian observers say, and the MOI confirmed to Ambassador, that they are nothing new and that they are typical of past campaign behavior by all parties -- ethnic Albanian and ethnic Macedonian alike -- in previous elections. Nevertheless, the conduct of these elections will be held to a higher standard by the international community, given Macedonia's EU candidate status and more tangible NATO membership aspirations. Failure to lower the number and intensity of such incidents, or to end them completely, will put those aspirations at risk. We are working intensively with our IC partners to make sure that all parties understand that message.

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